

# *A Study on the Transformation of the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival in Japan*

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**Abstract:** The Japanese Dragon Boat Festival originates from China. It was first carried to Japan in the 7th century, gradually developed into Men's Day after more than one thousand years of transformation from routine royal activities and female sacrificial activities, and finally converted into Children's Day today. The Japanese reform of the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival range from the types of celebrations to its meaning with regard to native customs and habits. Although the Japanese government modified and complemented the festival in various historical stages, forming a Dragon Boat Festival with Japanese characteristics, the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival is still heavily loaded with Chinese cultural elements.

**Keywords:** Japanese Dragon Boat Festival; farming culture; women; Men's Day; Children's Day

The reason the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival was carried to Japan is closely associated with the then Empress Suiko's strong belief in Buddhism and her great admiration for Chinese culture. Empress Suiko "invited eminent monks to the court," opening the door for Chinese culture to enter Japan's royal court. She sent Japanese envoys to China during Sui Dynasty for the first time, creating an exchange between the Chinese and Japanese cultures.<sup>①</sup> Over the historical course, the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival has been continuously modified and complemented and finally converted into today's Children's Day. By tracing the evolution of the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival, this paper will analyze what changes have been made in its customs and what trends have dominated these changes in the process to summarize the attitudes and ways Japan has taken towards accepting, inheriting and developing foreign cultures.

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① Mitsusada Inoue, 1981, pp.109-114.

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\* Foundation item: Decision-making Research Bidding Project of the People's Government of Henan Province — "A Study of the Value of Inheriting Henan's Traditional Culture for Developing Henan into a National Cultural Hub" (2017B361).

## 1. Introducing the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival to Japan

As to whether the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival originates from China, as well as whether its customs have absorbed and inherited the traditions of the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival, answers can be found from the following perspectives.

First, the earliest time of the Dragon Boat Festival in Japanese historical literature is slightly behind that in Chinese historical literature. As early as the Southern Liang period, Wu Jun in his *Continued Records on Universal Harmony* had written, “On the fifth day of the fifth month of the lunar calendar, Qu Yuan (340BC-278 BC, a Chinese poet and minister who lived during the Warring States period of ancient China) committed suicide by wading into in the Miluo River. Since then, the Chu people who were deeply distressed by his death had been throwing bamboo tubes full of rice into the river to pay respects to him on the day every year.”<sup>①</sup> In addition, Zong Lin in his *Record of Jinchu* also mentioned that people of the time picked mugwort, drank dwarf sedge wine and held a boat race to pay homage to Qu Yuan.<sup>②</sup> These historical records lead to the conclusion that the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival had formed in the 6th century, at the latest. While Japanese historical records about ritual activities on the fifth day of the fifth month can date back to 611 in the *The Chronicles of Japan*. According to this, “Under the order of Empress Suiko, a ‘herbs hunting’ activity was held at Utano (present-day Haibara-ku Adachi, Uda City, Nara Prefecture) on the fifth day of the fifth month. On the day, participants gathered near Fujiwara Pond before dawn and then set off at dawn.”<sup>③</sup> “Herbs hunting” in the literature refers to hunting antlers and picking dwarf sedge, mugwort and other such herbs in the fields. This is the earliest description of “herbs hunting” in Japan’s relevant historical literature. Judging from the time of the “herbs hunting” for the Dragon Boat Festival recorded in the literature, this Japanese ritual activity on the fifth day of the fifth month began in 611. If we consider this ritual activity as the origin of the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival, it lags about a century behind the Chinese activity for the Dragon Boat Festival in the Southern Liang period. Therefore, these inferences can be synthesized into a conclusion that the ritual activity for the Dragon Boat Festival in Japan is later than that in China.

Second, the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival matured during the Sui and Tang dynasties. According to the *Record of Jinchu*, “People would pick mugwort, weave them into the shape of a human being and hang them on the door to expel toxins. Meanwhile, they would pick dwarf sedge and shred or mince it to make wine.” “People would wear a five-colored silk-threaded braid on their arms to ward off diseases.” “People would eat *zongzi* (traditional Chinese rice-pudding) on the day of Summer Solstice. Zhou Chu called the food *jiashu* in his *Social Customs Documents*, and people would use new bamboo to make rice tubes. In addition, people would fasten the silk-threaded loquat leaves with five colors they called longitude braids to their arms.”<sup>④</sup> These records lead to the inference that the customs of eating *zongzi*, hanging mugwort, drinking dwarf sedge wine and wearing five-colored silk-threaded braids to ward off disasters and diseases and pray for safety were very popular at that time. Till the Tang Dynasty, there were more diverse activities for the Dragon Boat Festival. For instance, as described in *A Probe into the Dragon Boat Festival in the Tang Dynasty*, the custom of boat races as part of the

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① Wu, 1991, p.5

② Zong, 1987, pp.47-48

③ Miyazawa Toyoho Yaku, 2009, p.476

④ Zong, 1987, pp.47-52

Dragon Boat Festival came into being during the Tang Dynasty, apart from inheriting the long-lasting activities such as wearing five-colored silk-threaded braids to dispel diseases, pasting colored pictures on the door and eating *zongzi* since the Han Dynasty.<sup>①</sup> Moreover, there are also many records about the customs for the Dragon Boat Festival in the poems of that time. For example, Wen Xiu's poem *Dragon Boat Festival* reads, "For whom is Dragon Boat Festival formed, Qu Yuan it is people said; I want to laugh at the Chujiang River vast and empty, it cannot rehabilitate the man of integrity."<sup>②</sup> Judging from the lines mentioning "Qu Yuan," "Dragon Boat Festival," "rehabilitate" and other words, we can infer that the activities for the Dragon Boat Festival in the Tang Dynasty are related to Qu Yuan. Another example is Yin Yaofan's poem *On the Day of the Dragon Boat Festival*, reading "When I was in my prime, I was always overwhelmed by festivals by a jumble of feelings; but as I get on in years now, I've grown out of the mood to make a fuss about nothing; on the day of the Dragon Boat Festival, I am disinclined to follow the crowd who are busy hanging mugwort amulets, but feel like a drinking spree with dwarf sedge wine to pray for national peace."<sup>③</sup> The "mugwort amulets" and "dwarf sedge wine" mentioned in the poem respectively refer to the amulets made by mugwort and the wine made by dwarf sedge. These poets all named their poems *The Dragon Boat Festival*, demonstrating the somewhat strong influence of the festival on the lives of people at that time.

Third, it would be physically possible that the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival was introduced to Japan given that Japan frequently sent envoys to China during the Sui and Tang dynasties via whom Chinese culture was spread to Japan. It is recorded that Empress Suiko ordered to hold the "herbs hunting," the activity for the Dragon Boat Festival in Japan can be traced back to 611. According to *Japanese Missions to Imperial China*, as early as 600, Japan had sent envoys to China. Although there is no clear record about whether the first Japanese envoy to China sent by Empress Suiko returned to Japan, it clearly documented that the second Japanese envoy Ono no Imoko came to China in 607 and returned to Japan in 608, and the third Japanese envoy that was sent to China returned to Japan in 609.<sup>④</sup> Previous to that, there is no record about ritual activities held on the fifth day of the fifth month in Japanese historical literature. However, after Empress Suiko sent the third Japanese envoy to China, detailed records about holding a ritual activity on the fifth day of the fifth month appeared in 611 in the *Chronicles of Japan*. These records vividly reproduce the ceremonial rituals for the "herbs hunting" on the fifth day of the fifth month hosted by Empress Suiko who put strict demands on attire and carriage of officials and appointed directors for the "spearhead" and rear of the procession, which shows that the "herbs hunting" was a grand event with a large attendance. By reference, the ritual activity on the fifth day of the fifth month was already a well-established event in 611. Meanwhile, the change from "a zero-record activity" to "a well-established event" can serve as solid evidence that Japan had assimilated a lot from the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival of the Sui Dynasty.

Finally, Japan has learned and absorbed increasingly more from the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival, judging from the evolution of the festival on the fifth day of the fifth month in Japan from the Asuka period to the Heian period. During the reign of Empress Suiko, herbs hunting was the only ritual activity on the fifth day of the

① Jiang, 2005

② Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2008, p.16

③ Shanghai Classics Publishing House, 2008, p.12

④ Haruyuki Tono, 2007, pp.202-205

fifth month, as evidenced in some records, for example, “On the fifth day of the fifth month in the twentieth year of the reign of Empress Suiko (612), ‘herbs hunting’ was held”,<sup>①</sup> and “On the fifth day of the fifth month in the twenty-second year of the reign of Empress Suiko (614), herbs hunting kicked off.” Meanwhile, during the reign of Empress Kōgyoku and Emperor Tenji, herbs hunting was also organized on the fifth day of the fifth month. For instance, “On the fifth day of the fifth month in the first year of the reign of Empress Kōgyoku (642), envoys were called in to watch hunting in front of Miyake, Yosami, Kawachinokuni (a province of Japan in the eastern part of modern Osaka Prefecture),” “On the fifth day of the fifth month in the seventh year of the reign of Emperor Tenji (668), the emperor went ‘herbs hunting’ in the wilderness of Gamō (Gamō District, Shiga Prefecture),” and “On the fifth day of the fifth month in the eighth year of the reign of Emperor Tenji (669), the emperor went ‘herbs hunting’ in the wilderness of Yamashina (Yamashina Ward, Kyoto).”<sup>②</sup> Most of the ritual activities for the festival on the fifth day of the fifth month in the historical records focused on “herbs hunting.” The “ritual of archery” appeared in the *Nihon Shoki* for the first time in the late Asuka period. According to volume 29 of the book, “On the fifth day of the fifth month of 685, Emperor Tenmu hosted the ‘ritual of archery (an arrow shooting competition held in the court during the Heian period) at the south gate, and then went to Asuka-dera Temple to offer treasures to Buddhas as sacrifice and conducted the act of worship’.”<sup>③</sup> Emperor Tenmu was the 40th mikado and died in 686. Even on the fifth day of the fifth month in the year before his death, although in poor health, he insisted on hosting the “ritual of archery.” This fully proves that the ritual activity on the fifth day of the fifth month had already blossomed into an irreplaceable court routine at that time—even when he was seriously ill, the emperor still followed the tradition of hosting a ritual activity on that day. During the Nara period, records about horse-riding races on the fifth day of the fifth month started to appear in Japanese historical literature. For example, “on the fifth day of the fifth month in the first year of the Taihō era (701), Emperor Monmu ordered officials above five ranks (a Japanese traditional official rank name) to go on a horse-riding race, and the emperor watched it on site.”<sup>④</sup> “the fifth day of the fifth month is the Dragon Boat Festival, Emperor Ninmyō watched horse riding and archery at the Butokuden (Hall of Martial Virtues).”<sup>⑤</sup> The *Eiga Monogatari (Tale of Flowering Splendor)* of the Heian period described how Japanese people laid dwarf sedge over their roofs and conducted an act of worship with herbal pills as sacrifice on the fifth day of the fifth month.<sup>⑥</sup> In the late Heian period, the celebration activity on the fifth day of the fifth month was no longer a court routine exclusive to the noble, but found its way to the Buke and Heimin communities. On that day, the court was carpeted with dwarf sedge, and even the eaves of heimin’s dwellings were lined with the plant. Compiled in 833, Japanese *Ryō no Gige* wrote in its ten miscellanies that, “Both the first day of the first month and the fifth day of the fifth month (in the lunar calendar) were established as holidays.”<sup>⑦</sup> As described above, Japan had already designated the fifth day of the fifth month as a national holiday celebrated in a public and ceremonious way in 833. Japanese celebration activities on the fifth day of the fifth month have undergone continuous change, from the original “herbs hunting” ordered by Empress Suiko in 611, to the ritual

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① Miyazawa Toyoho Yaku, 2009, p.477

② Miyazawa Toyoho Yaku, 2009, p.322

③ Miyazawa Toyoho Yaku, 2009, p.673

④ Hayashi Rokuro, 1989, p.22

⑤ Muraoka Ryosuke, 1910

⑥ Hiroji Matsumura, 1973, p.352

⑦ Kokushi Taikei (Annotated Version) . *Economic Journal*, 1897, 12

of archery during the reign of Emperor Tenmu, to the horse-riding races held in 701 by Emperor Monmu, to the horse riding and arrow shooting by Emperor Ninmyō, to using dwarf sedge as amulets. Most of these activities, having a lot in common with Chinese customs to celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival in the Tang Dynasty, have been passed on from generation to generation as routine court rituals. By reference, as Japanese envoys to China's Sui and Tang courts carried the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival to Japan in the 7th century and kept learning traditional Chinese culture and customs, Japanese ritual activities on the fifth day of the fifth month were continuously enriched and were clearly named the Dragon Boat Festival. As recorded in historical literature, "The fifth day of the fifth month was the Dragon Boat Festival. On that day, Emperor Ninmyō watched horse riding and archery at the Butokuden (Hall of Martial Virtues)." With continuous evolution and development from the Asuka period, to the Nara period and to the Heian period, the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival culture had been well established as a court routine with a fixed celebration form, participants, time and venue, as well as celebration activities that have much in common with the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival. The Japanese Dragon Boat Festival has borrowed and assimilated the main contents of the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival.

## 2. Alienation of the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival and its customs in Japan

After being introduced to Japan, the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival was originally popular among the royal family and the nobles, but there were also some commemorative activities held by Japanese Heimin in the fifth month that we will discuss later. With time, these activities were integrated into the Dragon Boat Festival originating in China and developed into the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival with Japanese folk characteristics.

### 2.1 Women's Day characterized by sacrificial farming activities

Ancient Japan was an agricultural nation, and its people awed nature and adored gods. Hence, sacrificial activities before sowing and harvesting were an indispensable part of the lives of ancient Japanese people, and in this case of the sacrificial activities during the fifth month that were closely associated with transplanting rice seedlings, one of Japan's agricultural activities. Drawn during the 16th century in the Muromachi period, the *Genre Scenes of the Twelve Months (Screen)*<sup>①</sup> describes the ritual activities held by folks of that time throughout the year each month, and transplanting rice seedlings by female farmers is one of the scenes. In the light drizzle of the fifth month, female farmers were bowing, busy transplanting rice seedlings in the field. As described in the scene, female farmers were the main labor force and would work like that without rest for more than ten hours a day before transplanting rice seedlings was mechanized. Therefore, the female farmers who transplanted rice seedlings on the day were highly regarded. Meanwhile, ancient Japanese considered the fifth month "ominous," thinking that all kinds of activities should be held to remove ill fortune. To welcome the farming god and pray for a bumper harvest, the female farmers who would transplant rice seedlings were demanded to clean their bodies on the day. Specifically, the female farmers would be locked in a makeshift cabin made from dwarf sedge and mugwort to clean their bodies, for people of that time believed that only

① Created during the Muromachi period in 16th century, the *Genre Scenes of the Twelve Months* is listed as Japan's "important cultural property." Now, it is collected by Tokyo National Museum.

② Toshikatsu Itou, 2014, p.31

physically clean females could transplant rice seedlings.<sup>②</sup> Female's cleaning their bodies on the fifth day of the fifth month before transplanting rice seedlings was established as a sacrificial activity, which was otherwise known as Women's Day. Even today, some places in Japan still follow this tradition. In Japan's central and Shikoku regions, locals called their homes "women's kingdom" or "women's home" from the night of the fourth day to the fifth day of the fifth month, to the effect that women became masters of their homes on that day. By doing so, people prayed mainly for a bumper harvest via the women. Throughout this period, women were the protagonists of the festival on the fifth day of the fifth month.<sup>①</sup> "Important days such as the ones directly related to transplanting rice seedlings and harvesting were combined with the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival, and the fifth day of the fifth month thus became a sacrificial occasion in Japan".<sup>②</sup> Thus, Japan's folk custom on the fifth day of the fifth month came into being with local agricultural sacrificial activities.

## 2.2 Men's Day featuring samurai

During the Muromachi period, the samurai took over the remaining royal power from the government. Consequently, in an era when samurai were in power and warlords were locked in a dogfight, people worshiped samurai and regarded joining into the army as a most attractive career. Because "dwarf sedge," "militarism" and "victory or defeat" had the same Japanese pronunciation, and dwarf sedge with a wide bottom and a pointed top resembled a samurai's sword, so the plant came to take on new implications — "invigorating and developing the cause of the samurai." Hence, since the Kamakura period, men started to play more prominent role in the festival on the fifth day of the fifth month than young women, and the celebration meaning correspondingly began to change, praying that boys might flourish and come to the fore with great courage as samurai.<sup>③</sup> On the day, samurai would set out a suit of decorative armor in the parlour and hang banners and pennants outside to showcase the prosperity of the samurai clans. And today's custom of flying koinobori (carp streamers) in the courtyards and decorating the interiors with armor models and samurai puppets for the Dragon Boat Festival in Japan exactly dates back to the Kamakura period.<sup>④</sup> As men play more important role on festival, the activities on the day showed heavy involvements of men, for example, the custom of rock battles was all the rage at that time. As presented in the *Views Inside and Outside the Capital, Kyoto*<sup>⑤</sup> which describes the scenic attractions and folk customs inside and outside Kyoto, Japanese children would go on rock battles with dwarf sedge as shelter on the fifth day of the fifth month. In a rock battle, boys from the neighboring villages would stand on both sides of a river and throw rocks at the opposite bank.<sup>⑥</sup> Since then, the festival on the fifth day of the fifth month developed into Men's Day in a real sense.

The gradual transformation of the festival on the fifth day of the fifth month into Men's Day from Women's Day was mostly attributable to the rise of the samurai, the prosperity of samurai society and the wave of bushido development. In addition, Japan had established Hinamatsuri or Girls' Day (traditionally known as the Peach Festival) on the third day of the third month. Meanwhile, with a view to the integrity and completeness of Japan's festivals, the Japanese designated the fifth day of the fifth month as Men's Day.

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① Kenji Ishii, 2005, p.9; Akio Ojima, 1983.

② Nakamura Yōichirō, 2016, p.50

③ Toshikatsu Itou, 2014, pp. 31–32; Murakami Ryū, 2016, p. 51.

④ Murakami Ryū, 2016, pp51–52.

⑤ *Views Inside and Outside the Capital, Kyoto*, created by Japanese painter Kanō Eitoku around 1564 or 1565 and currently collected by Yonezawa city Uesugi Museum, is an important historical data source on Japanese local customs and practices. It delineates in detail a variety of items ranging from houses of the rich and the powerful to dwellings of the commoners, from countryside landscape to ceremonious routine activities held annually of that time.

⑥ Nihon Daijiten Kankōkai, 1973, p.36

### 2.3 Developing into Men's Day among Japanese folks

In the Edo period, Japan was socially stable and economically buoyant. Hence, many affluent commoners emerged. They inherited the custom of celebrating the fifth day of the fifth month and decorated their dwellings with samurai armor models on that day.

Flying carp streamers is a folk custom unique to Japan and bears two implications. The first one has a connection to a Chinese legend of carp jumping over the Dragon's Gate, so people would fly carp streamers, praying that boys might struggle with strong will to make their own way in the world;<sup>①</sup> the second has something to do with the Japanese anecdote of "carp out of water." Once out of water, carp, unlike other fish, would remain absolutely still, even under the knife on the cutting board. Therefore, carp were praised by Japanese as a metaphor for the brave samurai who would meet danger and death with assurance and composure.<sup>②</sup> Additionally, the custom of hanging carp streamers during the Edo period was a continuation of the habit of flying banners and pennants by samurai clans during the Kamakura period. In the early Edo period, the samurai class would fly banners bearing their kamons (emblems used to identify a family) at the door on the fifth day of the fifth month, which was followed by the then affluent commoners. However, because they had no kamons, they used "koinobori (carp streamers)" as a substitute. In that way, the festival on the fifth day of the fifth month was gradually established among Japanese commoners as Boys' Day during the Edo period.<sup>③</sup>

Drawn around 1856 to 1858 by Japanese ukiyo-e artist Utagawa Hiroshige, the *One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* delineated the scenery of Edo (namely present-day Tokyo), and recorded the daily lives of the residents, for example folk customs. Notably, the "*Suidō Bridge and the Surugadai Quarter*," one of the ukiyo-e landscape painting series, painted the festive scene on the fifth day of the fifth month. In the painting, a giant carp streamer is at the centerpiece, waving in the wind, with many other fluttering carp streamers and pennants of varying size around it. Although all the carp streamers are black, they are so vivid that even the fine texture in the black scales is clearly visible, as if the carp were going to jump out of the painting. Judging from the author's heavy use of carp streamers which account for one third of the entire picture, we can infer that people of the Edo period had attached much importance to carp streamers. Meanwhile, the painting also offered a glimpse into how ceremoniously Japanese commoners of the Edo period celebrated the festival.<sup>④</sup>

In addition, during the festival for the fifth day of the fifth month at that time, a special market would emerge where samurai puppets, dwarf sedge swords, dwarf sedge leaves and such necessities were sold, and even the bathhouses would prepare dwarf sedge water, setting the scene for a hilarious event comparable with the Girls' Day. On the day, people would feast on dwarf sedge wine, rice cakes and *zongzi*. Children would go on sword fights with their heads wrapped in narrow cloth strips and their dwarf sedge swords tucked into belts. After World War II, children began playing the sword fight game in helmets made of newspapers.<sup>⑤</sup> Thus it can be seen that during the Edo period, the customs for Men's Day had been well established, including not only having a bath with dwarf sedge water and drinking dwarf sedge wine to ward off disasters learning from Chinese customs for the Dragon Boat Festival, but also eating kashiwa mochi, flying carp streamers, displaying

① Kenji Ishii, 2005, pp.71-72

② Nagata Hisashi, 1989, p.37

③ Kenji Ishii, 2005, p.71

④ *The One Hundred Famous Views of Edo* was painted by Japanese ukiyo-e artist Utagawa Hiroshige, also Andō Hiroshige (1797-1858). With gay colors, masterly layout and vivid scenes, the series painting offers a glimpse into the daily lives of Japanese people.

⑤ Nagasawa Toshiaki, 2001, p.81.

decorative armor models and samurai puppets indoors and other customs complemented later adaptations unique to Japan.

#### **2.4 Transforming from Men's Day to Children's Day**

After World War II, Japan enacted a special law for national festivals and proposed to designate the first day of the fourth month or the third day of the third month (Girls' Day) for the coming year as Children's Day. On the thirteenth day of the fourth month of 1948, the Committee on Culture under the House of Representatives submitted the proposal of designating the fifth day of the fifth month as Children's Day under the theme of "valuing children's personality, seeking happiness for children and showing gratitude to mothers." Therefore, in July 1948, Japan officially designated the fifth day of the fifth month as Children's Day and stipulated a one-day national holiday on that day.<sup>①</sup> Since then, it has become one day of Japan's week-long holiday (known as "golden week"). The remaining days of the holiday are Constitution Memorial Day on the third day of the fifth month, Greenery Day on the fourth day of the fifth month and the weekend.<sup>②</sup> During this week, Japanese parents go traveling with their children to celebrate Children's Day.

Although the fifth day of the fifth month is now established as Children's Day in Japan, some customs stemming from the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival are still followed. Take dwarf sedge for instance, one of the necessities during the holiday — people put them across their homes and have a bath in dwarf sedge water. Around the fifth month, Japan's streams and rice paddies are lined with dwarf sedge, and people can pick them at will for free or buy them in flower shops. With the advent of the fifth day of the fifth month, all of Japan's flower shops will be full of dwarf sedge, lending plenty of festive atmosphere to the day.<sup>③</sup>

Because Japanese customs for Children's Day stem from those for Men's Day in the Edo period, carp streamers are still an essential decoration for today's Children's Day. But carp streamers made of paper or cloth nowadays are more colorful and diversified than those of the Edo period. Additionally, Japanese people also display puppets unique to the fifth month, decorative armors, helmets and such in their homes, for these articles are also important symbols of Children's Day. On the day, adults will decorate the interior with helmet models and other embellishments, and children will play with each other, wearing newspaper-made helmets.<sup>④</sup> As mentioned above, although the Japanese government has legally designated the fifth day of the fifth month as Children's Day by incorporating it into the Constitution to fill the gap in Japanese holidays, the customs for the day have retained the bulk of the customs for Men's Day during the Edo period.

### **3. Characteristics of the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival and its inheritance of the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival**

The Japanese Dragon Boat Festival has borrowed and inherited a lot from the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival culture. Over the past 1,000 years, its development has shown the following characteristics.

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① Wei, 2016, pp.216–218

② Kitahara Yasuo, 2007, p.565

③ An investigation made by the author during his study stay in Japan from 2012 to 2013.

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First, Japan has inherited the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival culture. Since the routine royal activity in 611, the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival culture has lasted over one thousand years. No matter how many changes the celebration objective has undergone, today's Japan still uses the term “端午の節句 or 端午の節供 (*Tango no Sekku*)”<sup>①</sup>, namely “Dragon Boat Festival.” There are two reasons why the Japanese people stick to using the Chinese name of “Dragon Boat Festival.” On the one hand, “*duan*” means “head” and “outset” in Chinese,<sup>②</sup> and “end, head, margin, outset and beginning” in Japanese,<sup>③</sup> so “*duan*” conveys the same meaning in Chinese and Japanese. Therefore, when the Dragon Boat Festival as established by the Chinese people for the fifth day of the fifth month in the lunar calendar was carried to Japan, it went down well among the Japanese people for they could understand its meaning. On the other hand, the ancient Japanese people had great admiration for the Chinese culture, so they deliberately retained the essence of the original culture when inheriting it. For instance, the names of other Japanese traditional festivals originated from China, such as “*Tanabata /Qixi* on the seventh day of the seventh month,” “Shangyi Festival on the third day of the third month” and “Chongyang Festival on the ninth day of the ninth month,” also remain unchanged. Today, together with Dragon Boat Festival and *Jinjitsu* (seventh day of the first month), they are hailed as the five seasonal festivals of Japan.

Second, the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival culture that stems from China has undergone some development and innovation in different social evolution stages after inheriting the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival culture. The Japanese Dragon Boat Festival culture retained the custom of “warding off diseases” originated from the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival culture. Be it the “herbs hunting” held in court as a routine royal activity, or later conducting the act of worship with herbal pills as sacrifice, having a bath in dwarf sedge water or drinking dwarf sedge wine and other such customs, “warding off diseases” was the original intention. Records show that in 611, Japanese Empress Suiko headed a procession of officials to go “herbs hunting” to pick dwarf sedge and mugwort. Moreover, in the oldest existing collection of Japanese poetry *Man'yō Luster*,<sup>④</sup> there are also poem lines describing Japanese nobles used dwarf sedge to decorate their hats. Meanwhile, these poem have given a clear depiction of many scenes of the Dragon Boat Festival on the fifth day of the fifth month, where Japanese emperors headed officials wearing hats decorated with dwarf sedge to go for outings, go hunting, host banquets and other ceremonial activities. People then also believed that the mind-refreshing aroma of dwarf sedge can dispel diseases.

Moreover, detailed descriptions can be found in the *Ise Monogatari (Tales of Ise)* that was written in the early Heian period, that people would reciprocate *zongzi* wrapped by dwarf sedge during the Dragon Boat Festival. “During Dragon Boat Festival, a man received *zongzi* wrapped with dwarf sedge that was made to ward off diseases, and then he wrote a reply letter, ‘You picked dwarf sedge while I went hunting. Thanks for your efforts to pick dwarf sedge in wetland! Such a pity that I could not join you at the moment! So, I would like to give you a pheasant as a return gift.’”<sup>⑤</sup> As shown above, the activities to celebrate the Dragon Boat Festival on the fifth day of the fifth month were all the rage among Japanese commoners in the early Heian period. While inheriting the custom of “herbs hunting” of the Asuka period, the Japanese people enriched customs like making *zongzi*

① Kitahara Yasuo, 2007, pp1024–1025.

② Dictionary Editing Office of the Institute of Linguistics CASS, 2012, p.324

③ *Chinese & Japanese dictionary*, 2006, p.1524.

④ Shiraishi Shizuo, 1982, p.432

⑤ Sato Takanobu, 2017, p.66

wrapped with dwarf sedge and giving *zongzi* and hunting harvests to their relatives and friends as presents. Plus, the *zongzi* mentioned in the literature refers not merely to a kind of food wrapped with dwarf sedge, but a kind of “decorative *zongzi*.”

Until the Nara period, the Japanese people firmly believed that dwarf sedge could ward off diseases. According to records of the *Eiga Monogatari (Tale of Flowering Splendor)*, the Fujiwara clan proposed to use dwarf sedge on the fifth day of the fifth month, which can serve as clear evidence that dwarf sedge has played an important role in the ceremonies during the Dragon Boat Festival held by the royal family and the nobility.

Meanwhile, dwarf sedge has also possessed an irreplaceable position in the activities held by commoners during the Dragon Boat Festival. At the very start, when the Dragon Boat Festival was regarded as Women’s Day by commoners, the female farmers would be locked in a makeshift cabin made from dwarf sedge and mugwort to clean themselves before transplanting rice seedlings. Later when the Dragon Boat Festival was transformed into Men’s Day, because dwarf sedge resembled a sword in shape, so the people then believed that dwarf sedge was a symbol of invigorating the cause of the samurai. Hence, men started to feature prominently in the Dragon Boat Festival since the Kamakura period, and the meaning of the celebration correspondingly began to change, praying that boys might flourish and come to the fore with great courage as samurai. For that reason, the samurai puppets, decorative armor models and carp streamers for today’s Children’s Day all have a connection with dwarf sedge. Because “dwarf sedge” shared the same pronunciation with “militarism” in Japanese, so the “Dragon Boat Festival” was transformed into Men’s Day, and consequently, the “militarism” worshiped by Men’s Day has played a decisive part in the celebration activities and forms for the Dragon Boat Festival of that time. And today’s relevant customs for Children’s Day are an inheritance and continuation of Men’s Day. As painted in the *Views Inside and Outside the Capital, Kyoto*, during the Kamakura period, boys would go on a “dwarf sedge sword” fight during the Dragon Boat Festival. During the Edo period, people would hang dwarf sedge beneath their eaves, have a bath in dwarf sedge water, drink dwarf sedge wine and wrap their children’s heads with dwarf sedge or thrust the dwarf sedge into adults’ hair to ward off diseases and disasters. Dwarf sedge has played a much broader and deeper role in the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival than in the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival.

Third, the reason why the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival has been handed on from generation to generation for more than one thousand years and been established as a national statutory holiday is closely associated with the active participation and strong boost of Japanese rulers and the government. Out of great admiration for China’s traditional culture and Buddhism culture, Empress Suiko took the initiative in China-Japan exchanges by being the first mikado to send a Japanese envoy to China in the Sui Dynasty. According to historical records only, Empress Suiko sent Japanese envoys to China in the Sui Dynasty up to four times. Following Empress Suiko, Japanese emperors during the Tang Dynasty also successively sent Japanese envoys to China. Through their trips to China, these Japanese envoys learned advanced technologies and abundant Buddhism culture, and promoted traditional Chinese culture in Japan, marked by the custom of celebrating the Dragon Boat Festival. Before Empress Suiko sent Japanese envoys to China in the Sui Dynasty, there were no records about holding activities on the fifth day of the fifth month in Japan. Nevertheless, just after the third Japanese envoy to China sent by Empress Suiko returned to Japan with plenty of knowledge about China, records show that Empress Suiko held “herbs hunting” appeared in Japanese historical literature in 611. Although it was the first time for Japan to host sacrificial events on the fifth day of the fifth month, there were signs that the event had already

been developed to some extent, judging from the aspects of scale, attendance and attire which were all different from common events in the country. Meanwhile, from the perspective of celebration activities, “picking dwarf sedge” and “hunting for antlers” had much in common with “picking herbs,” one of the Chinese customs for the Dragon Boat Festival during the Tang Dynasty. As shown above, Japan’s first event for the Dragon Boat Festival included many characteristics learned and inherited from the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival. Subsequently, Japanese emperors in the later generations inherited the custom of holding a celebration ceremony on the fifth day of the fifth month and added other activities. But, no matter how Japanese Dragon Boat Festival has evolved, its celebration meaning has remained the same as that of the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival, namely, warding off diseases and praying for wellness.

Fourth, the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival culture has been closely intertwined with local lives and natural conditions. According to the varied needs of different historical stages the Japanese rulers modified and complemented the celebration activities of the festival, finally forming the Dragon Boat Festival with unique Japanese characteristics. Besides, Japan’s natural environment and climate have also remained a key factor in the formation of the celebration activities for the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival. As the plum rain season sets in around the fifth month in Japan, it grows moist and sultry, and the Japanese food are easy to be poisonous. For that reason, the Japanese people consider the month to be ominous, and form a list of “dos.” Hence, as early as ancient Japan, women had to follow the “do” of cleaning themselves before transplanting rice seedlings. Later, this must-do fused with the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival, forming the oldest folk activity for the Dragon Boat Festival in Japan. Although the Japanese government has written the fifth day of the fifth month into the Constitution as Children’s Day, its celebration activities such as “having a bath in dwarf sedge water” and “drinking dwarf sedge wine” are also a continuation of the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival, while decorating homes with puppets and armor models and flying carp streamers are an inheritance of traditional customs unique to Japan’s Kamakura period. Still, the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival is now different from the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival in some customs although its name, time and meaning remain the same as those of the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival. To conclude, the Japanese Dragon Boat Festival has assimilated the full essence of the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival and then fused with local Japanese culture and folk customs, thereby evolving into today’s Children’s Day.

#### 4. Summary

The popularity and generation-by-generation inheritance of the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival in Japan is substantially due to Empress Suiko. In the reign of the empress, she made enormous efforts to build Buddhist temples and promote Han culture, and also gave prominence to Chinese etiquette. Meanwhile, she sent Japanese missions including envoys, students and monks to China during the Sui Dynasty for many times to learn Chinese culture, and deliberately imitated Chinese cultural activities in the court, such as “herbs hunting.” Thanks to her efforts and her successors’ inheritance in the Nara and Heian periods, the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival became well established in Japan’s royal court. Then in the Kamakura period, the samurai came to power in Japan. Due to the class worship of “elite samurai,” militarism began sweeping across Japanese society. Against this backdrop, coupled with the same pronunciation of dwarf sedge and “militarism” in Japanese and the similar shape of dwarf sedge and swords, the Dragon Boat Festival on the fifth day of the fifth month

was transformed into Men's Day. By the Edo period when peace reigned supreme in Japan, the craze for militarism and the samurai started to fade and the Dragon Boat Festival correspondingly was celebrated mainly by commoners rather than samurais. To structure Japan's traditional holidays in a systematic and integrated manner, the government intervened to designate the Dragon Boat Festival as Children's Day by promulgating the national holiday law. However, Children's Day still bears the mark of the Chinese Dragon Boat Festival of the Tang Dynasty in its main celebration form and meaning. As the Chinese traditional Dragon Boat Festival was carried to Japan, it filled a gap in Japanese culture. Since then, the Japanese people have mixed the Dragon Boat Festival culture with their political and economic development needs. Owing to the Japanese government's endeavors to spread and promote the Dragon Boat Festival culture, the festival culture has created a key bond knotting Japanese nationals and their social system.

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